

## will wonders ever cease by littlequasimonsters

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**Summary:**

It's about loving and leaving and how depending on where you're standing the Venn diagram is either a single circle or two separate spheres. It's about growing up but not growing apart and learning how to be okay again. It's about all of these things, but above all else, it's about the imprinting of love.

Will Byers and healing, or his best version of it.

## **will wonders ever cease**

Will gets back to his house from the Snow Ball some time near midnight. He toes off his shoes at the door even though he knows that Jonathan worked very hard to shine them, but seeing the little gray scuff marks on the left toe satisfies him somehow. Jonathan is outside in his car with Nancy, or perhaps the car has already pulled out of the driveway and is rolling its way through Hawkins' darkened streets to the Wheeler residence. It makes no sense for Jonathan to drop Nancy off after his little brother, but that's what dating entails, Will supposes.

Joyce is sitting on the couch, watching Miami Vice, and she breaks into a vast smile when she sees Will. Despite it all, Will smiles back, and it is genuine even in its tininess.

"How was the dance, sweetie?" Joyce asks, muting the TV and patting the space next to her on the couch.

Will shuffles over in his stiff shirt and his woolen socks. He shrugs as he sits down. "It was okay, I guess."

"Didn't you have fun?" Joyce wraps her arm around Will's slight frame. It's a nice consolation that even after everything that happened Will can still find the childish illusion of safety in his mother's hold.

"I did, but I don't know. I feel weird," Will confesses, his voice is a tiptoe.

Joyce sighs. "I'm sorry, baby. I was really hoping you'd have a good time. Maybe even dance with someone."

Will shrugs again. He did dance with someone, but he doesn't want to tell Joyce that because then he would have to admit how much he disliked it. There's a lot about the Snow Ball that he doesn't know how to tell Joyce about because he doesn't even know what it all means. If Will's being honest with himself, the most fun he had was in those moments before all the dancing started, and he was hanging out with Mike.

He wonders, how do you stop being so sad all the time? These days he feels like a collection of tragedies stitched into the mimicry of a boy. He doesn't know how to be okay anymore. Okay is a destination that Will can see. He can envision it, but the path to get there has been obscured.

"Mom?"

"Yes?"

Will nestles a little further into Joyce's arms, and it is so warm that just the feeling of it might make him cry.

"Next weekend can we go see a movie together?"

"Of course, baby."

Joyce presses a kiss to the top of his head, and Will drifts off to sleep. His last thought is of Mike and Eleven swaying together and the sensation of his stomach being yanked out of his throat.

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"Watch out!" Steve yells, yanking Dustin back by the collar of his coat.

Dustin makes a sound like 'ermgf' as the firecracker whizzes into the air and splits apart in two circles of purple before dying out with a final ring of green. There's a round of cheers from everyone; the rest of the kids huddled on a blanket on the ground, Nancy sitting on the hood of Jonathan's car, Hopper and Joyce on the porch, Jonathan setting off the firecrackers, and Dustin drifting too close.

"I wasn't gonna actually walk up to it," Dustin protests.

"Well, it sure looked like it, shithead."

"Can we do more than one at a time?" Eleven asks, eyeing the remaining three firecrackers stuck into the gravel of the Byers' driveway.

"Uh, we could, but I'd need other people to help me light the others

to be safe,” Jonathan explains. He looks quite frazzled enough already. His hair is never exactly neat, but it’s standing up as if he’d been hit by one of the firecrackers.

At the same time, Nancy hops off the car, and Steve steps forward, both saying, “I’ll do it.”

There ensues quite a bit of awkward shuffling and avoidance of eye contact, and Will winces internally from secondhand embarrassment. Thankfully, no one comments on it, and Will can only hope that this isn’t a symptom of being a teenager. Otherwise, he might be happy to spend a couple more years in the eighth grade.

Mike checks the time on his watch and jumps up from the blanket, triggering a domino of complaints as everyone was quite comfortable huddled together. “It’s almost midnight! It’s a minute to 1985! Can we set them off when it hits midnight?”

“Sure,” Nancy agrees, finally meeting Steve’s eyes as she looks to the two boys for confirmation.

“Why not? Let’s do it. You’ll keep time, Mike?” Steve asks.

Mike nods eagerly, and everyone gathers to circle around the firecrackers. Even Hopper deigns to set foot off the porch and join Eleven’s side.

“Okay, okay, okay, here we go, guys,” Mike warns.

“Ten... nine... eight...”

Will shouts along with all the force his diaphragm can give, and he feels their voices reverberating inside him.

“Seven... six...”

Mike’s grin is too brilliant to be safe. It splits across his face as a firework would, and Will longs to smell sulfur on his hands. Will doesn’t know what to do with himself and these people who he cares so much about that he fears he may burst with it. They’re all here, but Will is miles away all of a sudden. He aches so dearly for them, but it’s only swelling inside of him with no way out.

“Five... four...”

Jonathan, Nancy, and Steve are kneeling by a firecracker each, giddy with anticipation. Will's not sure he remembers how to breath outside of the inhales needed to keep shouting the numbers.

“Three... two... one!”

Three fireworks explode in the sky, showering the Byers house in a rainbow. Mike laughs and throws an arm around Will's shoulders. The flashes of light have turned Will's friends into skip-frames of wide eyes and open mouths. Jonathan jogs backwards towards him and ruffles his hair lightly. Will's lungs kickstart, and he's pulled back from the edge.

Almost immediately, Joyce begins folding up the blankets laid out, and the kids run into the house to gather their things. Steve goes to prep his car for at least three drop-offs. There's only so far you can stretch a 10pm curfew with begging and bargaining even if it is New Year's Eve.

“Did you have fun, kid?” Hopper asks. Somehow in all the motion, he'd placed himself next to Will without him noticing, which shouldn't be possible because Hopper is not a small man. The police chief does that sometimes. Checks in on Will because he was there in the first missing search and in the hospital, and he probably feels some duty to Will's continued well being or something noble like that.

“I did,” Will answers.

He did have fun, but he also feels himself on the brink of a drop. 1984 was terrible, but at least Will knows what 1984 was about. He has no idea where another year will take him. They'll be starting high school by the end of the summer, and isn't that a terrifying thought? What else will change in a year? What nightmare things could linger?

Will he make it to the end of 1985?

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Will doesn't like Eleven at first. No, 'doesn't like' is too big of a

concept to fit what Will feels. It hangs loose around the frame of it, slipping off the shoulders. It's more like he doesn't know what to do with her, doesn't want to have anything to do with her, because before she showed up and in the gap of time before she came back Mike spent most of his time with Will. Now, he's always with her, and Will hates it.

Mike brings it up once, tilting his head down into Will's space in that way he does as if he needed to make sure that all Will could see is him. He says, "I don't get it. I thought you and El would get along great."

Will doesn't know how to say to Mike that his girlfriend is a lot more observant than they give her credit for. Sure, she doesn't get why she can't get up and leave when a conversation bores her. She'll probably never understand the idle small talk that is Mrs. Wheeler's lifeblood, although Will isn't sure he does either. Eleven is smart though, astute, and she sees him as no one else does. Will doesn't know how to explain to Mike that Will is just that little bit too close to him and his girlfriend is well versed in jealousy.

"I don't know," Will says. "Why did you think we'd get along so well anyway?"

*Because we were both in the Upside Down? Because on some level even you know how much you mean to us? Why should we get along at all?* Mike had Will, and then he lost Will and found Eleven. Then Eleven was gone and Will was back, but Mike wasn't better off. Now, Eleven's back for good, and they both kind of wonder what would've happened if just one of them stayed away. In which dimension of those possibilities would Mike be happiest? That answer's easy; it's the current one. Here's the hard question, the backbreaker question: would he be okay if Will never came back but he got to keep Eleven? Would he have been like that for a year if Will was gone? Will doesn't want the answer to that.

Then, there's the scenario that he only lets himself think about alone at night when he's about to fall asleep and can't be held accountable for his terrible thoughts anymore. What if he never disappeared in the first place? What if Eleven never showed up at all and she just stayed in the labs? Would Mike still--

No, nothing good comes out of that. Besides, Will's glad Eleven's here, even if he's not sure they'll ever be anything more than two similar yet opposite forces connected by the tenuous link of Mike.

"Because you're both the kindest people I know," answers Mike.

Will laughs it off, changes the subject, because what is he meant to do with that? They aren't kind. Eleven is well versed in jealousy, and Will is an expert in what-if scenarios and scrounging for time with Mike even though he knows that's what makes Eleven's fists ball up and her mouth twist. El deserves the world after everything she's been through, and all she wants is Mike, and Will doesn't want to give her that. He's anything but kind.

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"I heard you," Eleven says, closing Will's door behind her.

"Well, just let yourself in, I guess," Will says, huffing quietly.

He spins his desk chair around and raises his eyebrows. He knows he sounds rude but that's okay, he thinks. He's at that age after all.

Eleven rolls her eyes because she's also at that age, and if Will's being honest, she's got the whole teenage rebel thing down much better than he ever could. She repeats, "I heard you."

Will glances at the clock and wonders if it's worth trying to play innocent until Hopper calls for her to leave. He's been coming along to their house for dinner a while now, and he's been staying longer and longer after the meal, sharing cigarettes and memories with Joyce. Will doesn't mind. It makes Joyce happier, but it does mean that he won't be calling for his adoptive daughter any time soon.

"I wasn't sure it would work," Will finally says.

"It did."

Somewhere in the early hundred of days, Will had tried to contact Eleven. He thought that maybe his time in the Upside Down could be of some use. He forced himself to look at the way Mike would sag with the realization that it would be another day without Eleven.

Dustin and Lucas didn't know about Mike's ritualistic attempts to contact Eleven, but Will did. Because Mike trusted him with it. That has to count for something, so Will tried. He sat on his bed and reached for that static-like buzzing in the base of his skull. He mostly talked about Mike, but he also thanked her for saving him. Sacrilegiously, it felt like praying, talking to some greater unknown that won't talk back but you hope hears you anyway.

"We're connected, Will," Eleven says, stalking towards him until she can rest her hand on the back of his head, right where the buzzing is. "You feel it, right?"

Will nods and swallows hard. Her fingertips are spots of cold through his hair. Her pinky graces the skin of his neck and it's enough to send goosebumps down his entire back.

"Good. I want to be friends." She drops her hand back down and sways back onto her heels.

"We are friends."

Eleven frowns. "No, good friends. I want to be good friends."

"Why?" Will asks.

"Because you know," she pronounces each syllable with unfettered intent. Eleven has a way of speaking that cuts to the bone. There's something doubly dangerous about the words of someone who had been denied them for so long.

"I know," Will concedes. He reaches out and wraps their chilled hands together.

Eleven leaves that night with a drawing of herself, and Will has tiny braids behind his ears. Things get better after that. Will was wrong. They aren't linked by some tenuous connection to Mike. They're more than some boy. They're the product of a different dimension altogether, and that's pretty awesome when you think about it. Will quickly decides that this is the only good thing to come out of the Upside Down. A friendship with Eleven.

Eleven's right. Will knows. Will knows a lot of things. He knows the names of everyone on the Jedi Council. He knows the capitals of all fifty states because they had a test about it in school. He knows what it's like to want Mike Wheeler all to yourself, but he has a feeling that she doesn't mean any of these things when she tells him that he knows with enough intent to strike.

What she means is that Will knows things that the dark tells him.

Will has no explanation for it. The best he has is this. The Upside Down is dark and cold. It feels like how the world would if everything were made of the shadow parts of themselves. The Mind Flayer was made of that same stuff, and it left Will but maybe not everything about it did. Or maybe Will has just been tainted by it all and now the dark speaks to him.

He thinks that it's more insidious than what Eleven does because Eleven has mind powers so she can hear through a radio into another realm. Will has a piece of that other realm stuck inside of him so he can hear the secrets that the shadows know and the darkest parts of people. He can't control it. It comes to him unbidden and unwanted.

Troy shoulder checks him in the hallways and the shadow of his jean pocket whispers of a switch blade, making Will's spine shiver. The cashier at the stores reaches across to hand him his change and the slivers of dark between her sleeve and her wrist tell of bruises in the shapes of her boyfriend's fingerprints. At the gas station, he sees a woman with hair black like oil and lighthouse eyes and suddenly he knows. Everyone who shares her bones is buried in southern soil sweetened with too-ripe fruit, and he wonders how did her bones and sinew end up so far north?

It scares him because does that mean it never left? In the dead of the night as Will lies awake in bed, tracing the edges of that scar on his ribcage obsessively, he worries. Is it coming back?

It goes on the growing list of things that Will tries not to think about.

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Will's not the only one with a list of things that they don't think

about, don't talk about. No one talks about what happened in the cabin with Will. No one tells him how he got that scar on his ribs. He doesn't want to know either until one day he sees the fire poker leaning against the wall, and he nearly throws up right then and there.

He doesn't. Throw up, that is. He tries though. He goes to the bathroom and kneels over the toilet bowl dry-heaving and pathetically hoping that something will come up. A year ago, he dreaded the times he would end up in this position, but if he vomits something gross then at least he'd know that it's something that can be expelled. That it isn't a permanent part of him. Instead, nothing comes up, and the dark still communes with him.

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Will wasn't lying exactly when he said that he doesn't get scared the way he used to. It's hard to be scared of *The Nightmare on Elm Street* or Dustin's sleepover stories that are direct rip-offs of Stephen King novels when you've lived it. Will gets scared by smaller things. Flickering lights. Open fires. Hospital beds. These changes can all be expected, he thinks. There's nothing particularly peculiar about that.

Here's something unexpected. Will doesn't cry the way he used to. That's not to say he doesn't cry. It's more like his tears have been reallocated.

He falls on his way to Dustins' house, his palms hitting the sidewalk and his knee making a hard collision. Before, it would've been more than enough to bring tears to his eyes. Now, he stands up, hissing with the pain, brushes the dirt from his hands, and keeps walking.

Instead, he sees Eleven fix her hair and check her eyeliner in the reflection of a closed shop window when she doesn't think anyone is around. He watches Nancy instinctively tilt her cheek into Jonathan's kiss and Joyce tap her cigarette three times against something before lighting it. He catches Dustin opening up his backpack on Monday only to find that he left his worksheet at home and going through a one-man silent show of regret and realization.

Will wants to weep with how unbearably human it all is. Is it not a

miracle for all of them to be standing there? Is it not a happy accident for Mike to smile to himself when the sun begins warming come spring? For Lucas to drum that anxious beat against his desk every day in the last five minutes of school? For Max to hum to herself as she skates, the pitch hitching every time she makes a turn?

Sometimes it reminds him of how Jonathan talks about his photography and the importance of singular moments. Will cries to see things so alive.

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"Shit, that's so cool!" Dustin exclaims as they pass around the birth certificate Eleven pulled out of the safe in Hopper's office to show them. "It looks totally real."

"And how many birth certificates have you seen to say that?" Lucas asks.

"Shut up. I've seen my own, and it looks exactly like that," Dustin insists.

"It says Jane Hopper," Max says before the two boys could devolve further into dissent. She's gotten rather good at that as of late.

"Yes," Eleven says with a noticeable straightening in her posture.

She takes incredible pride in her name, and she makes everyone call her Jane now. With the key exception of the party. Will thinks that it's because she was Eleven when she found them. She was Eleven when she saved them, and that's something to honor.

"But we all call you El. Wouldn't that be weird?" asks Max.

There's a brief moment as the validity of that statement sinks in for all of them.

"We can say it's short for a middle name, Eleanor," Mike suggests sensibly.

"Your cousin from bad place Sweden?" Mike slaps Lucas' arm for that one.

“That wouldn’t work either,” Will says. The certificate is passed to him now, and Dustin was right. It looks incredibly authentic. “We also call her Eleven.”

“We could say that she was eleven when we met her, but we were all twelve, so it’s like a joke thing,” Max says.

“No, no, no,” Dustin says, shaking his head hard enough for his curls to bounce in the wind. He sticks his socked feet up into the air and wiggles his toes. “We should say it’s eleven for eleven toes.”

“No.” Eleven reaches out and pushes Dustin’s feet down with her arms, ignoring his whines.

Will says, “Maybe we can say that she always rolls elevens when we play Dungeons and Dragons.”

“Uh, no way. I’m not admitting to that many people that we play D&D,” says Lucas.

“It’s Eleven because on a scale from one to ten she’s an eleven,” Mike says, looking at her with eyes like liquid sugar.

This is enough to set off a round of eye-rolling and groaning, but Eleven laughs and presses a kiss to his cheek. Will feels a little weird about it, but he doesn’t think much of it. He feels weird most of the time nowadays.

Besides, it’s such a happy hypothetical to think about because it would mean that Eleven was actually allowed to go places with them often enough to warrant a comment on the nickname. Will doesn’t know how realistic this possibility is, but it sure is nice to think about.

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The summer of 1985, the Byers brothers go to New York City. Jonathan wants to check out NYU before application season begins in earnest. Joyce agrees to let Jonathan take Will with him, unwilling to deny her son a chance to have fun and to escape from a place that reminds him too much of the Upside Down. They take the car and a map with Will’s carefully shaky hand tracing the major highways of

America.

It's the first road trip that Will has ever been on, and it makes him feel like a real adventurer. Somewhere between Ohio and Pennsylvania, Jonathan lets Will try his hand at the wheel. With The Kills playing out of the stereo and the thrill of cruising the car down an empty stretch of night road, it's the first time in a long while that Will feels his age.

For the last year, Will felt like the horror inside his mind had swelled to encompass the entirety of the universe. When they get to Long Island, and he gets to place his feet in waters that have never seen Hawkins, Indiana, it settles the niggling doubt that he'd never get away. Because, as it turns out, the world is a lot bigger than Will thought it was. The danger is gone for now, and Will knows that there is something waiting for him beyond if he can get through this.

"New York was pretty cool, right?" Jonathan asks about 50 miles out of the city with the tilted smile that means he knows he's shown Will something magnificent.

Will nods eagerly. "I can't wait until you go to school here, and I'll have an excuse to come all the time."

Jonathan laughs, and Will doesn't know if he understands how serious Will is about that.

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Will comes back to Hawkins with a sunburn on his shoulders that's only just starting to fade and many photos of himself in front of the Empire State Building. Jonathan skillfully maneuvers the car into their driveway, gravel crunching underneath. As much fun as the road trip was, Will is glad to be home. His back aches something awful, and he's looking forward to a bed that doesn't smell like stale linen and dust. He doesn't expect any great welcome. They'd called back to tell Joyce the day they'd arrive, but you can't exactly gauge a good ETA on this type of thing.

The last thing Will expected is for Mike to come running through the door before Jonathan even has time to cut the engine and for his

heart to jackrabbit out of his chest. He steps out of the passenger side in a daze. Mike wraps Will into a hug, his arms encircling Will's head, and the whole time Will thinks, *"it's not fair, it's not fair, it's not fair."*

Of course. Of course that's what this has been. Will has a crush the size of the state of Wisconsin on Mike, and he's only now realizing it.

Mike let's him go and steps back, shoving his hands into the pockets of his shorts and smiling at Will as if there were no one else he'd rather be seeing in that moment. They'd only been gone for a week but Will swears that Mike got taller. He's still that awkward stage of too much limb and too little control but it's more than enough to kick Will's hormones into overdrive. Maybe there's a theory that applies to this, that can explain the inexplicable way Will's reacting to Mike. Maybe after you've been around something for too long even intensity becomes equilibrium, but if you remove yourself from the stimulus only to return after a short duration, you lose any adaption you'd made to the intensity. You become vulnerable to it all over again.

"How'd you know when we'd be back?" Will stammers. He backs up until the backs of his knees hit the car, needing to place some distance between them.

Mike shrugs and his whole lanky torso moves with it. "I didn't know exactly what time, but Jonathan told Nancy who told me. It's not like I had anything better to do, so I decided to hang around."

"Thanks," Will mutters.

"I'm glad you're back, Will. I missed you," Mike says, casual in his affection as he always is. The curve of his joy pulls his lips into a smile.

Will can feel himself smiling back without prompting, and compulsively he wants back into the embrace until he can just sink. He is so, so screwed.

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Here's what Will knows about being queer. He knows that it's

something that people die for, that people get killed for. The news loves talking about it. AIDs. The gay disease.

In a fit of morbid curiosity, Will looks it up in the library, checking over his shoulder for the nosy librarian or kids from his school. His heart is in a chokehold the entire time. The absolute last thing he needs is to be caught looking into this stuff. That would be as good as an admission of guilt at this point.

Here's what he learns. He has been cursed with getting these things that never leave you. The Upside Down still has its tether hooks in Will's shadow, and Will has read about the betrayal that can be acted out by your own veins. They get in, and they never get out, and you die either way.

All this makes liking Mike feel a lot like a diagnosis. Will needs to *get out*.

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Objectively, Will's feelings get worse, which he didn't think was possible, but here we are again. The universe, Will, and being proven wrong. Everything about Will's life feels like a bad practice in foreshadowing. Here's why Will didn't like Eleven, and here's why he hated the Snow Ball. Over there's why he gets the feeling of someone churning butter in his stomach, lined up neatly under Mike's freckles and the way he laughs.

It was infinitely easier to deny when it was just heart flutters and wanting to spend the most amount of time with Mike. It's much harder to fake ignorance when he has dreams about Mike that leave him sweaty and his sheets a mess.

Now, he wants all these impossible things. He wants to press his thumbs into the hollows of his hipbones. He wants to find out what noises Mike would make if Will licked the inside of his mouth. He wants to fit himself into the space between Mike's legs.

It makes him sick. He knows it does. It makes Troy and all his friends right. It makes Lonnie right. They all knew, even before he did. Will Byers is a big, old queer. It makes his ribcage hollow out, like if you

tapped on it you would just hear the echo of a thump. The precursor to a cadaver

It's counter-intuitive but somehow the knowledge of his feelings has made it harder to hide. Within a month of their return, Jonathan starts sending him knowing looks. Will doesn't want to give Jonathan too much credit though. He is a teenage boy with all the subtlety of a drunken Wookiee trying to ballet dance. It doesn't take a genius to figure it out, so Will starts making up excuses to not be there when Jonathan gets that constipated face like he's about to do his darn hardest to drag this truth out of Will.

Will accidentally stumbles into Jonathan's trap while they're listening to the newest album that Jonathan wanted to show him. In between setting the record in and nodding along innocuously, Jonathan does that squinting, blinking thing, and Will just knows what's about to come next.

Before Will can come up with a reason to leave, he asks, "Will, do you like Mike?"

"Of course, I do," Will answers with his pulse pounding in his ears. "He's my best friend."

"No, I meant like," Jonathan coughs. "Like how I like Nancy."

Will was going to deny it. He was preparing to. He had the words ready to go in his throat and everything. He didn't mean to do it, but there's something about keeping a secret to yourself for too long. It gains a life of its own. It longs to be heard by someone almost more than you long to keep it in, so Will doesn't. He doesn't keep it in, and he's probably biting his way through his lip as he nods with all the solemnity of a man staring down his funeral pyre.

"Oh, Will," Jonathan whispers, and before Will can register anything meaningful about his tone, he's been jerked into a hug.

Jonathan keeps muttering something soothing, but Will just grasps on as tight as he can because he didn't even realize how frightened he'd been of losing Jonathan until now. It's out there into the world. Irrevocable proof that Will isn't normal, that he is a freak.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” Will repeats like a mantra.

“Hey, you know you don’t have to apologize for this, right? There’s nothing wrong with you,” Jonathan enunciates each syllable of ‘nothing wrong,’ and his hand is a steady grip on Will’s shoulder.

Will tries to slow his breathing, tries to believe his brother, but he doesn’t understand. Will wasn’t supposed to admit to this. He was supposed to try to get away. Doesn’t Jonathon understand that Will exists on a knife’s edge? That he’s living on borrowed time? He was left halfway down this abyss and one wrong step means he will never get to leave.

The two of them fall silent, and the record that had slipped to the wayside rears back into their collective consciousness. There is electric guitar and heavy drums and someone singing about love that won’t return. Suddenly, Jonathan laughs, and it’s a crackle of static, disrupting the sound waves.

“What?” Will asks.

Jonathan shakes his head and grins. He says, “What is it about the Wheeler siblings?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, whatever it is. It’s not from Mr. Wheeler that’s for sure.”

It’s such a stupid observation. Utterly meaningless in the grand scheme of Will’s revelation, but Will laughs so hard that his sides hurt. Jonathan cracks up too as Will leans into his side, trying to shove him off the bed. Jonathan has somehow made it seem normal with this one comment. Like Will’s crush is the same as his very acceptable girlfriend, and Will loves him for it.

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“Is that?” Will asks. He hesitates to say it because he might be wrong, and then he’d just be projecting like a weirdo, but he swears he heard it.

“Huh?”

Mike looks up from where he'd been hunched over his guitar, a gift from Nancy for his birthday. He was certainly awful at it in the beginning. The Wheelers denied him proper lessons since Mr. Wheeler believed that it would only fuel Mike's attitude problem. He's been getting better on his own though, tinkering away in his basement and obsessively watching MTV performances to catch glimpses of the guitarist's hands. As far as Will knows, he only pulls it out to play around him or Eleven.

It's just the two of them right now. Will isn't entirely sure what everyone's exact reasoning for not hanging out today was, but he knows why he's here. He sets down his color pencil. He's been trying to get back into art. He couldn't for a while after the whole fiasco with the Mind Flayer drawing the tunnels. His family and friends have been more than willing to be character studies, but Will just can't get them right. Mike is a particular subject of interest. Today he is snatches of curls and angles in fire-engine red.

He clears his throat and asks, "What song were you just playing?"

"Oh, yeah, it was the chorus bit for 'Should I Stay or Should I Go.' That's your favorite song, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is," Will says. He kind of loves that Mike knows his favorite song and is super okay with being stared at for hours so Will can work on his sketches.

"Remember when you left your Walkman and Jonathan's mixtape here a while ago?" Mike asks.

Will nods. It was in Mike's room for a good week too because Mike kept forgetting to bring it when they'd hang out and Will would forget about it when he came over.

"Well, I found out that I can suss out most of the chords if I just listen to it enough times," Mike explains, shrugging. Mike's shrugs are a weird endeavor. Always a bit too much or a bit too little due to him shooting up like a bean sprout. They're something else to be snapped at by Mrs. Wheeler. Apparently, it shows disrespect.

"That's so cool," Will says, trying his best to not act like a key feature

of his daydreams for weeks now have been Mike and his guitar and rock music.

“Thanks but it’s not that cool. I don’t know the whole song, and I’m pretty slow at it.”

“Are you kidding me? Soon you’ll be leaving us to become a professional musician. Try to remember me when you make it to MTV please,” Will teases, putting on a pout for effect.

Mike laughs, throwing his head back and clapping. Will wonders why everything with Mike has to be such a full-body experience.

“Let’s be real. You’ll be the next Monet or something, and we’ll get to say that we were your first great works,” Mike says with a wave at the sketchbook in Will’s lap, effortlessly making Will blush because hearing Mike compliment his art never gets old.

“Besides, I don’t think I’d want to be a musician anyway. I think, I mean I don’t know, but I think I’d like to be a writer,” Mike says.

His eyes can’t decide between Will and everything else in the room. He says this hesitantly, the cradle of the new bass in his voice folding his confessional into itself. Mike has never told anyone else about this yet. This is how you talk about something that you want so dearly but fear how it would fair in the harsh air of the world outside of your lungs.

“That’d be even cooler!” Will says. This, he knows how to do. He’s been a best friend since kindergarten. Positive reinforcement comes like second nature. “You’d be Stephen King.”

Mike gets this crooked smile as he ducks his head. “Or maybe screenplays, like directing and stuff. I don’t know.”

“George Lucas then,” Will shoots back immediately.

“Thanks. I’ve kind of written some stuff before. Super short things but it’s fun. It’s not too different from planning a campaign actually.” The crookedness has straightened into a full-blown grin, and Will swears there’s the slightest flush to Mike’s face when he says, “You can read some stuff if you want.”

"I'd love to."

"Okay, great," Mike mumbles, his fingers go back to plucking out The Clash to give himself something to do.

"I can make you your own mixtape. For practice," Will offers, the words ejecting themselves without any consideration for the person saying them.

"Really?" Mike perks up. "Could you actually do that?"

"Yeah, Jonathan has all the stuff. I'm sure he won't mind."

"You're the best, Will."

Will has that playing in his mind for the next ten minutes when he goes back to the shape of Mike's eyes, which are impossible. Mike softly rasps the lyrics to all songs that Will knows best as Will thinks about his art and Mike's writing, his mixtape and Mike's guitar. He thinks that he's possibly reinventing hopeless.

--

Will doesn't want to call upon some old adage. He doesn't look at Mike as if Mike hung the moon or with stars in his eyes. Will doesn't give him any part of the universe. Will looks at Mike like--if he thought he might be dying, Mike's name would be the one on his lips in the abyss. If the world were coming to an end, Will would spare one last thought for Mike. He looks at Mike like he knows that Mike would come for him. He can say this with greater authority because he did think he was dying and the world was subtly ending and Will still had an awful crush on Mike.

Will Byers doesn't look at Mike Wheeler as anything other than exactly who he is, and doesn't that make it worse?

--

As it turns out, Jonathan does mind. Jonathan minds very much and is actually a very judgey person, but he lets Will into his room and gives him a rundown of the system anyway.

"It's actually pretty easy," Jonathan says.

"Thanks," Will says, making himself comfortable in front of Jonathan's box of records, ready to pick out songs.

"Are you actually going to make him a mixtape? Is that a good idea?" Jonathan asks.

Jonathan's tone and his slow, judgemental blinking makes Will bristle like a feral cat. His brother is possibly the last person in all of Hawkins who has any right to express disapproval on anyone else's dubious choices with their feelings.

"Hey, speaking of music, I heard Steve play a mixtape with The Smiths on it in his car. Weird, right? He doesn't seem like the type to listen to them," Will says, making sure to stare Jonathan down.

He's not even lying. A couple days ago when Dustin somehow roped Steve into being their chauffeur again, Will did hear stuff that was more Jonathan's speed coming out of the car stereo. That alone isn't incriminating, but he raised his eyebrows at Steve through the rearview mirror, and Steve nearly swerved off the road trying to switch to a radio station.

He does the same thing now. He raises his eyebrows and lets Jonathan take the easy way out.

"Try not to break anything," Jonathan mutters, backing out of his room.

Will lets out a sigh of relief and turns back to the records. Try not to break anything. Advice for the ages.

--

Another thing Will tries not to think about: whatever the hell is going on with his brother, Nancy, and Steve.

Will comes home early from the Wheeler's basement one day. Mrs. Wheeler cleared them out so she could spend the rest of the afternoon cleaning after an argument between Dustin and Lucas knocked over a half-full bottle of cola and a bowl of potato chip

crumbs. He tosses his bike haphazardly onto the lawn and slams his way into the house, calling for Jonathan. Having been ousted, the gang decided to hit the arcade instead and rushed off to scavenge change for the machines.

“Jonathan!” Will barely manages to choke out his brother’s name before something about the scene stops him in his tracks.

Steve and Jonathan are on the couch together, which is strange in itself. After all, Jonathan’s dating Steve’s ex-girlfriend and even before then they weren’t on the best of terms. Add to that the blushing and the ruffled clothing and Steve’s neatly coiffed hair falling apart. The two of them are acting like how Nancy and Jonathan act when Will has very clearly interrupted something.

Mike is waiting out on the lawn for Will to return with change, and he has a wonderfully carefree evening at the arcade ahead of him. Will very quickly decides that he doesn’t want to know. Jonathan opens his mouth to say something, but Will beats him to it.

“Could I borrow some money for the arcade?” Will blurts out.

Jonathan blinks at him as if he were expecting Will to demand answers, although he should know that Will doesn’t really push people like that.

“Yeah, yeah, sure. Don’t stay out too late,” Jonathan says robotically, handing Will some loose bills from his wallet without even really counting it.

For Will’s part, he grabs the money, nods in Steve’s direction, and runs right back out of the house. “Thanks, Jonathan!”

Back out on the lawn, Mike looks startled. “That was fast.”

“Yeah, let’s go,” Will says, hopping on his bike and offering no further explanation. It’s not like he has one to give anyway, and he suspects that Jonathan doesn’t either.

--

The more the days of summer fill in between the present and when

Will left New York, the more he finally understands Jonathan's long-held wish to leave Hawkins behind. Will thinks that maybe he'd like that, too. He isn't sure he wants to tell anyone about this new-birthing desire. Especially, his mom because how must it feel to know that you raised two boys who would love nothing more than to leave their home behind? Will wants her to know that it's not her fault. The thing is, you can't just make a home out of the pieces no one else wanted.

Take inventory. Count one divorcee left to her own devices after the implosion of a marriage between high school sweethearts. One son who knows the dark room more than he knows the locker room and is better at watching people than he is at talking to them. Finally, one boy who likes drawing and other boys and learned how to cry but never how to stop.

Then, Will catches Nancy in their house, sitting at their kitchen table. Her hair has grown out enough to be bundled up at the top of her head again. Loose strands of fine, brown hair frame eyes that are nothing except the intensity of ambition. They scorch the book in front of her as if she might find her ticket out of Hawkins in the pages of a study guide. Will thinks about Mr. Wheeler's arm chair and his apathy, about Mrs. Wheeler's wine glass and her ignorance. Will realizes there are many ways to be unwanted, and you know, at least Joyce tried.

She tries so damn hard, so does that make Will horrible for wanting to leave?

--

There's always that week when the weather goes from hot to blistering. Will can't even sit on the curb because the concrete is burning. He'd much rather be inside with his new X-Men comic and a glass of water with plenty of ice cubes that he can crunch. Instead, he's sitting out on Lucas' lawn, while the boy tries not to kill himself on a skateboard. It's so bright out that he can't even read the comic, the sun turning the glossy pages into a painful refraction.

"Lucas, can we please do this another day? It's too hot out," Will complains.

“Wait, hold on. I’m getting it,” Lucas says, wobbling a few feet before jumping back off to safety.

Lucas doesn’t say it, but Will knows that he’s doing this because of Max. Will mercifully doesn’t mention that Max looks much cooler on her skateboard. Lucas is bundled up in a helmet and kneepads and always ends up windmilling his arms around if he even works up enough nerve to get both feet on the board.

“God, I wish we had a beach or something. Or maybe even a lake to swim in,” Will says, closing his eyes and thinking about Long Island.

“We’ll be back at the pool again soon.”

“It’s not the same.”

Will wraps his arms around his knees and ponders the nature of leaving. He can see the shine of sweat across Lucas’ forehead.

“Did you know that Bob wanted us to move to Maine before he--” Will makes some vague gesture that’s supposed to stand in for ‘got mauled by a demodog.’

“Wait, what?” Lucas stops with the skateboard, picking it off the ground and turning to Will. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, I didn’t know, but I heard Mom tell Hopper about it.”

“Do you think you guys would’ve gone?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes I think it would’ve been nice,” Will says.

“Yeah, I get that.” Lucas walks over and plops himself onto the grass next to him. “But I’m also really glad you’re still here. It wouldn’t be the same without you.”

All at once, Will remembers that Lucas was willing to brave Hawkins Lab on his own just to get him back, that here’s another one of his best friends. His brave, wonderful, stupid best friends. They’ve ruined him. Will was fooling himself thinking that he’d be happy to up and leave. He is never going to be fully satisfied anywhere else because he has a growing suspicion that he’s already met the best people in

his life before he ever turned fourteen.

Will bumps their shoulder together and doesn't say any of that. They're boys, and boys don't say mushy shit like that even if the sight of Lucas' dumb helmet and his sweaty smile is making him a little teary-eyed.

"You're never gonna be as cool as Max," he says as a substitute.

"God, I know! Don't remind me," Lucas groans. "She's all tough and skater-y and from *California*."

"Well, I guess you'll just have to work harder then, but she might just laugh at you if you go to her dressed like that."

"Fuck you, Will," Lucas says, pushing him over.

Will laughs to the sideways view of green grass and blue sky and Lucas' failure at balance.

--

Bob is evidence. Bob is a summation of Will's mistakes. Sometimes Will still wakes up, choking on his own breath and all the ways that he can no longer say sorry. Will doesn't simply want to leave for himself. If he's gone, then maybe everyone else can be safe again too.

It blows his mind that he's been so easily forgiven. He wonders where he can learn that skill.

--

*"We are in the final week of the joint-expedition search for the wreckage of the Titanic with no results. At this rate, the ship may never be found..."*

The NPR host continues to drone on about the Titanic, and Will genuinely debates opening the door and rolling out. The broken bones might be better than spending a day trip to Chicago with Hopper. The chief made the offer to take Will to the Art Institute of Chicago after seeing some of Will's sketches on the living room table. Joyce looked so hopeful at the prospect that Will couldn't say no. When he told the rest of the party, Dustin tried to start a prayer circle

for Will. Eleven didn't exactly appreciate the joke against her adoptive father, but even she was a little sympathetic while saying goodbye to Will this morning.

As it is, Will's just glad that they're almost at the museum and that Hopper stopped trying to force idle conversation thirty minutes back. It's not that Will doesn't like Hopper or that he doesn't appreciate all this, but Hopper is gruff and grumpy and pretty much the antithesis of Will. They don't exactly have all that much in common besides Joyce, and Will suspects that the whole trip is just a way to get on Will's good side anyway.

When they get there, Hopper pays for the tickets, and Will attempts to hide his enthusiasm. Hopper doesn't seem like he would know how to deal with unbridled excitement in a pubescent boy about something that isn't sports or shooting a gun. Nevertheless, Will is the one leading the way through the gallery with a skip to his step.

Eventually, they end up in an exhibition of the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, and Will is transfixed by a painting on the far wall. He's not entirely sure his legs would even listen to him if he tried to move away. The canvas is bigger than Will, maybe even bigger than Hopper.

It is a  $\frac{3}{4}$  profile of a man dipped in psychedelics. The curving swoop of his hair drips into the yellow paint of a surface behind him that isn't a surface at all but a sky of raining clouds. The half-lidded eyes and toothy smile are blue-tinted but so incredibly warm despite the cool tone. The stiff, purple collar flows into a snaking river. The curve of an ear is actually an echoing dream. There are no dark shadows in this painting, no chiaroscuro. The entire thing is blasted into technicolor. Will loves drawing in colors. He's an avid fan of comic books after all, but this is something else. Will didn't know that colors could just do that.

"You like it?"

Will's head snaps around to the source of the voice. A young man in a lilac button-up shirt with capped sleeves and black shorts walks over to Will. He inspects the painting as well with a gap-toothed grin.

"I love it," Will says, all thought of containing himself forgotten. How can anyone contain themselves in the face of something so liberated?

"Thanks, little man. I worked pretty hard on it," the man says.

Will wants to tell this artist that he has taken the inside of a candy store and melted down the hard candies and reinvented it into a snap-capture of freedom. Clearly, Will should leave the dialogue to people like Mike because all he actually does is borderline yell at the man, "You did this?"

"I did." The man points to the tiny white placard on the wall and reads, "Ezra Hofman."

"Wow," Will says in an exhale. Ezra isn't really how Will would've imagined the artist of this piece. His hair is clean cut, and his clothes are subdued, but the painting is wild.

"Are you an artist, too?" Ezra asks.

"Oh no, I mean I just draw, but not like this."

Ezra shrugs. "Everyone starts out just drawing."

"He's damn amazing at it in my opinion," Hopper says, picking the worst moment to interject. The man has his mouth downturned as if daring Ezra to disagree.

"Really?" Thankfully, Ezra only appears amused and not offended. "What kind of things do you draw?"

"My friends and family mostly. I'm trying to get it to look like them, but it's hard. I'm not so good at it," Will mumbles, locking and unlocking his fingers together. He can feel his face burning up.

"Hmm, this is going to sound weird, but don't look at your paper so much when you're sketching. You've got to train your hand to listen to what your eyes are seeing. Does that make any sense at all or do I sound crazy?" Ezra says.

"No, no, that does. Thank you," Will says, his words trip over themselves in their hurry to get out.

“No problem. Realism is pretty easy. Just comes down to practice. The hard part is making something that’ll get people feeling,” Ezra continues, jerking a nod at his own work. “Did that make you feel something?”

Hopper pulls a face from behind him that can only be described as ‘what kind of bullshit are you on?’ Miraculously, Will doesn’t care about what Hopper is going to think of him anymore and answers honestly.

“Yeah.”

“Then I’ve done good.” Ezra grins again, and the gap between his teeth is wide enough for a raisin.

Later, when they’re getting dinner, Will has a pen and a napkin and tries to put Ezra’s advice to practice. The Hopper on the page looks deranged and misshapen, but he thinks he gets what Ezra means about training your hands. Will hasn’t been very good about trusting his own hands in the last year. They’ve done too much, seen too much. Sometimes, Will still fears that if he looks away from the page for too long, it’ll warp into tunnels and darkness.

“I don’t know how you do that,” Hopper says, popping Will’s last fry into his mouth.

“What? This?” Will points at his napkin, and Hopper nods. “It’s just drawing.”

Hopper scowls. “Stop downplaying yourself, kid.”

“Sorry.”

“You don’t gotta apolo--” Hopper cuts himself off, dragging a hand over his face. “Look, what I’m trying to say is that you’re special. You understood all that artsy mumbo-jumbo earlier. You’ve got a way of looking at the world that’s different, and it’s good, so keep doing what you’re doing, I guess.”

“Thank you,” Will says quietly while his brain panics about what does one do when Police Chief Jim Hopper compliments them? Compliment him back? Leave the country? Will settles for saying, “If

this means anything coming from me, I think Mom likes you.”

Will now gets to add himself to the handful of people that have ever seen Hopper flustered because that’s the only word to describe the stammering and the fidgeting.

“She was so happy knowing that I’d be spending time with you today. I think she wants us to bond just in case,” Will keeps talking. This is *fun*, and he wants to see how far he could push it. “You should bring her flowers next time.”

“Okay, kid, tell me. What do I need to do to get you to shut up about this?” Hopper asks, standing abruptly.

“Ice cream.”

“Done.”

Will wouldn’t say that the conversation becomes easier after that, but they’re not so stressed about it. And when they finally return to the car, the NPR station has moved onto the decommissioning of Route 66.

“Goddammit, I can’t handle another car ride of this crap,” Hopper says, playing with the tuning dial on his radio.

Will doesn’t know whether to laugh at Hopper or cry for Eleven’s sake. If Hopper hates NPR too, why did he possibly think that’s what Will wanted to listen to? Why did he not switch it off earlier? Hopper finally settles on a classic rock and folk station, and Will does laugh then.

“Hey, this is real music, okay? I don’t care what sort of nonsense your brother’s been indoctrinating you with, but music isn’t all that electronic noise and screaming,” Hopper says, pulling the car out of the parking lot.

“No, I like it,” Will says and taps his fingers along his knees.

Hopper gives him an approving grin. “You’ve got good taste, kid.”

--

Before any of them notice it, summer has flown by, and they've all been sucked into the cesspool of high school. It's the first week of September, and Steve has started his training with the police station, and Jonathan's birthday is right around the corner.

The Byers kitchen is filled with what can only be described as the surprise party planning committee. Joyce and Will are there obviously. Nancy, too. Mike was dragged along by his sister because she insisted that they need an extra set of hands. Will isn't too sure how Mike ended up here. Last time he checked Mike had very heatedly demanded for Nancy to keep him out of her love life.

"Hey, Will, I've got something for you," Mike whispers while Joyce and Nancy are busy discussing the logistics of how to keep Jonathan away from the house.

"What do you mean?"

"C'mon," Mike says, pulling Will along, careful to not alert his sister of their departure.

Mike takes Will over to the backpack that he'd brought over and pulls out a full set of drawing charcoal and a sketch book that actually looks professional.

"Wh-what? Why?" Will stutters. He doesn't even know where to begin with questions. He runs his hands over the paper. It must've cost Mike a small fortune.

"I went with Nancy to buy her present for Jonathan in the art shop, and I noticed that these were on sale. I was going to save it for Christmas, but then I remembered that you always make Jonathan something for his birthday. You can use this stuff," Mike explains. He's pretty much bouncing in spot, which shouldn't look as endearing as it does given how lanky Mike is.

"How did you afford all this?"

"I watered Mrs. Heely's plants for a month, remember?" Will did remember. Mike complained about it all the time because Mrs. Heely is crazy about her plants and gave him a meticulous list of tasks for

everyday. He was always biking away from hangouts just to water the plants. “Nancy also put in some money, which is why I’m here.”

Will is not going to cry. He is not going to cry. “You didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to. You’ve been reading all the crap that I’ve been writing, and you were so excited about meeting that artist. It’s the happiest we’ve seen you about art in a while. You deserve to work with something better than color pencils,” Mike says as if it’s no big deal.

It’s awful because to him it isn’t. That’s just what Mike is like. He’s everyone’s best friend, and he’d go the extra mile for all of them. It’s Will’s own damn fault that his heart won’t listen to logic.

On the subject of throwing logic out the window, Will says, “You know, I did finish that mixtape for you recently. I just forgot to give it.”

That’s a blatant lie. He finished it ages ago. He’d started with looking for songs with easier guitar parts, but Will soon realized that he doesn’t know anything about guitars, and it devolved into songs that remind him of Mike. He never handed it over because it felt too close to a confessional.

“Really?”

“Yeah, let me go get it.”

So Will once again demonstrates his lack of self-preservation instinct and hands over a stereo love letter, but Mike hugs him tight enough that he can almost forgive himself for it. In that moment, Will learns another three things about Mike.

Mike’s hugs are so warm that Will can forget how the cold has seeped into his veins these days.

Will knows the dark, and there is none of it in Mike. He is that painting, pushed all into color, all into light.

There is an actual reason for why Will can never get Mike’s eyes right. He doesn’t look into them for too long because if he does, it feels like he’s letting the sickness win.

Will stands his ground and looks up into Mike's eyes, and it's burning in your skin except in a good way. It makes Will feel like he could conquer the world.

Will quickly decides that loving Mike can't be a disease. He knows disease. He knows hospital beds and testing and no promise of ever getting better. He knows the feeling of remission with the ghost of it hanging over you. Mike isn't that. Mike is possibly one of the brightest things in Will's life, and loving light can't be a thing of the dark.

--

"Do you ever think you want to forget it all and leave?" Will asks Eleven.

He's doing his math homework, and she's knitting. When Dustin questioned her about it, she said that she needed some kind of hobby while they were all busy with school.

She glances up and then returns to her needles. "I did. Once. When I found my sister."

"What made you come back?"

"You can't forget, Will. It doesn't work like that," Eleven says. She says it the way other people comment on the weather, but that's kind of always how Eleven speaks.

"You're right," Will agrees. He thinks that he already knew the answer before he ever asked Eleven.

"Does this look like a hat?" Eleven asks, holding up something blue and white.

"Does Hopper have two heads?"

"No."

"Then it doesn't look like a hat."

Eleven frowns at the tangled mess in her lap and says, "Maybe I'll try

a scarf instead. Can you get me books for that from the library?"

"Yeah, sure."

Will stops running.

--

You never quite love again like when you're young. There's something about being fourteen and the right amount of desperate that makes that shit stick with you.

Will is going to be okay. He'll get over it eventually, but he's never going to forget. His stomach is always going to lurch at the first sight of dark hair or that particular slouching lankiness. His heart will always have a soft spot for freckles, and he's always going to get that hitch in his step when he hears those certain songs, the ones that remind him of study sessions and D&D campaigns. This first love has made a carbon footprint on the way Will is going to love for the rest of his life, and Will never even really got to live it.

It wasn't seeing Mike and Eleven together for the first time or even any other time after that. It's this thought that breaks Will's heart. A lot has happened to Will Byers in not a lot of time, but somehow this feels like the worst. The first love of his life is a third-body experience, and how is that fair? A lot has happened to Will Byers in not a lot of time, and he knows. Fair has got nothing to do with it.

So Will is a freshmen in high school when he gets his heart broken by a boy who didn't even know he held it in the first place.

He's gotten much better about talking to other people about his problems now. More like, he gave up on the idea that he was going to appear any tougher by bottling shit up, so he takes his obscure sorrow and goes to Jonathan's room. When he opens the door, he can't even bring himself to be shocked that Nancy and Steve are both there.

Jonathan is stammering silently, trying to scourge up some explanation for why all three of them are cuddling in his bed. Steve looks intimidated even though Will doesn't come up to his shoulder,

so it's not like he's going to be getting the shovel talk from Will. Nancy just purses her lips and tilts her chin up in a challenge, as if to say, *"Yes, these are my boys. Got a problem?"*

Will thinks that's why on some days Nancy is his favorite, even more than his own brother. He ignores Jonathan's struggle and scrambles onto the bed, burrowing his face in the duvet somewhere around Jonathan's shins.

"You okay, buddy?" Jonathan asks. He immediately removes his arm from where it was around Nancy and runs a soothing hand along the back of Will's head. Nancy's still only his favorite some days. Will really does have the best big brother ever.

"I'll be fine," Will says, muffling it into the bed.

"Wanna talk about it?" Nancy asks.

Will turns his face out of the blanket to look at Nancy and also for practical reasons of breathing. Maybe it should be weird to talk about his crush on Mike to his sister, but they're already all interconnected in inexplicable ways. They passed weird ages ago.

"Your brother's really oblivious," Will mutters.

Nancy smiles slightly. "That he is. Thank you for putting up with him."

"You're welcome," Will says for lack of a better response. It pulls a laugh out of Nancy at least, which is enough.

"Hey, it'll be okay. You'll see." Steve decides on now to unfreeze, scooting off the bed. "Lucky for you, I know exactly how to deal with a broken heart."

Nancy purses her lips again while Jonathan looks anywhere but at Steve. Will doesn't really know their timeline, but he does know that there was a bit when it was just Nancy and Jonathan. For all intents and purposes, Steve did get his heart broken by Nancy.

"How is that?" Will asks.

"I'm glad you asked, young Byers. Nancy and I are gonna go to the store for some ice cream." Steve opens his arms and makes a show of his declaration. Maybe he senses that moment of discomfort too, and this is his way of saying it's okay.

It works because Nancy is biting back a smile as she asks, "We are?"

"Yes, and Will and Jonathan are gonna pick a movie for us to watch when we get back," Steve continues as if Nancy didn't interrupt him.

"We are?" Jonathan mimics Nancy's tone and the two of them exchange fond looks.

"Yes, get with the program, guys," Steve insists, pulling Nancy up by the arm and hustling her towards the door while she makes dramatic reaches back towards Jonathan.

In that moment, Will decides that they must be good together even if it's an unusual configuration.

"What movie and what flavor ice cream do you want?" Steve asks Will.

He gazes up at the face of Steve Harrington, someone who Will could never have imagined setting foot in the Byers house but is now doing his best to cheer him up, and answers, "Star Wars and rocky road."

"Good choice. You heard the boy. Let's go, Nance." Steve proceeds to herd a giggling Nancy out of the room.

"Do you wanna talk to me about it right now?" Jonathan asks as soon as they are out the door.

Will shakes his head. "Maybe later."

He's not sure he knows how to phrase it yet anyway. How do you explain that you are fourteen and sad because you know that there is a version of you out there that will always love this person? Jonathan may not get this but he gets Will, so he simply shrugs and leads the way into their living room and the cabinet that stores all their VCRs.

Later when Nancy and Steve have returned, Will watches them bicker

and tease in the kitchen and the way his brother's eyes are when he has them in sight. He asks, "Are you happy with them?"

For a split second, Jonathan tenses up. It's such a small change in tension that Will might've missed it if he weren't sitting right next to him on the couch. His brother looks from him to Steve and Nancy and the corner of his mouth turns up.

"I am."

Will smiles wide enough for the both of them and rests his head onto Jonathan's shoulder. "Good."

--

It is October, the time when pumpkin fields pop up out of nowhere and their sleepy town gets covered in a blanket of leaves. Eleven finishes her scarf for Hopper, Lucas finally masters the skateboard, and the pool has closed for the fall. They're coming up on two years since Will disappeared and a year since Eleven closed the gate, and he hasn't had any major night terrors since July.

Will's realized something. The Mind Flayer and his friends and loving Mike Wheeler have shaped him irreversibly. He could move half-a-world away from Hawkins, Indiana, and he would still carry it in his bones. But the knowledge doesn't shake him the way it once did. It's not a burden to be shouldered, a chain and ball for the rest of his life, a scar in the shape of a fire poker. It's him.

Against all odds, Will Byers is going to be okay.

### **Author's Note:**

This is absolutely just one huge ramble because I need Will to be okay. The title is taken from "The Mystery of Love" by Sufjan Stevens. The longest scene in this whole thing was Will and Hopper. It must seem super dissonant but I ended up loving the dynamic too much to cut it whoops.

Also I'm not sure if the description was good enough but the 80's was big on pop art and an almost graffiti

or advertisement-like style, so that's what I was imagining. Along with some surrealism because I love surrealism. In August of 1985 the Art Institute of Chicago did have an exhibition for the school fellowship program. The artwork and artist I made up.